

How To Choose a Real Estate Agent

By Cathy King

When you've decided it's time to get serious with your house hunt, teaming up with the right real estate agent can save you time and money. Ask family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers for the names of agents they know and would recommend. An agent may be more enthusiastic about finding the perfect house for you if a prior client has referred you. It helps if you find an agent whose personality matches yours, but it's more important to find someone you trust.

Buyer's agents work with potential homebuyers to find the best home to suit each client's needs. Seller's agents work with homeowners to sell a home for the best negotiated price. A dual agent works for the broker who carries a seller's listing but also works with a buyer who wants to purchase the listing. A dual agent must show loyalty to both parties and the buyer and seller must approve of the arrangement in writing.

A professional buyer's agent will interview you about the type of home you are seeking, advise you on current listings available, and explain other details of purchasing a home that may seem confusing. A buyer's agent can also help you with the financial details of buying a home by recommending lenders, inspectors and escrow companies.

If you are unsure how much home you can afford, a buyer's agent can help you calculate how much you need for a down payment and what your monthly payments would be if you qualify for a mortgage loan. Many agents require that clients prequalify for a loan to help the buyer stay within an affordable price range and avoid disappointment. It also speeds up the home buying process and offers the agency assurance that you have the financial means to make it to closing. It also simplifies things for you since you will know your price range.

To promote a good working relationship with your agent it is important to be honest about your financial situation and your preferences. A reputable agent will work hard to find a home in the neighborhood and price range you seek, but you should be open to suggestions. Remember that your agent has access to more inside information about homes that are coming on the market. When working with an agent you have an obligation to be responsible also. Always be on time for appointments and communicate honestly with the agent after a walk-through. Communicating what you like and don't like can help the agent guide you to other homes that more closely fit your requirements.

An agent may ask you to sign an exclusive agreement. Doing so means that you are committed

to working with one real estate agency and you may have to pay that agency a commission even if you find a home on your own. A nonexclusive buyer agency allows you to have multiple buyer agents, although certain conditions may apply.

Any agreement that you sign with an agent should be in writing and cover a specific time period. It should detail the expectations of buyer and seller and specify the geographic areas to be covered. The agreement will also disclose the terms for agent compensation. Buyer's agents are usually paid a commission at closing but agents in some areas may operate differently. Before you sign any agreement with a real estate agent, make sure you understand all the details including the compensation structure and how to terminate the contract if necessary. Request a copy of the agency contract and take a couple of days to study it before you sign. If you don't understand something, ask questions until you feel comfortable with the arrangement.

If you are not sure an agent is the right match for your needs, you can make a short-term agreement from one week to two months initially. That way if the agent doesn't work out, you can switch to another agency when that short-term agreement ends.

You may encounter a high-pressure agent who seems more intent on making a commission than finding the right home for your family. If you believe an agent is taking you to inappropriate homes, sit down with him immediately and have a serious discussion. Make your preferences clear and let the agent know you aren't happy with the homes you've been shown. Most agents are anxious to make a sale but their ultimate goal should be finding a home that suits your needs.